

Teacher Version

Briefing Memo VI, Imperialism & the Spanish-American War

At the close of the 19th century, the United States hadn't fought a foreign war for 50 years and paid little attention to diplomacy. The world was a dramatically different place. Germany and Japan were more powerful (at the expense of France and China), while Spain and Russia grew very weak. British might still circled the globe, but faced new challenges in both Europe and Asia. And the United States was now a Great—but untested—Power.

The most pressing issue facing the United States was in the Caribbean. Cuba began a rebellion against Spanish rule in 1895, which disrupted American trade and threatened American investments. Businessmen wanted the United States to intervene to end the conflict [[United States Note to Spain](#)] and the general public wanted to end Spanish "atrocities," as vividly reported (or fabricated) by newspaper journalists.

President William McKinley was opposed to war, but a Spanish diplomat's indiscreet letter, stolen and published in the newspapers [[DeLome Letter](#)], forced American action [[William McKinley's War Message to Congress](#)]. Spain was no match for the

United States on land in Cuba or on the seas in the Philippines and the war was soon over [[Treaty of Peace between the United States and Spain](#)].

Victory proved to be more problematic—even after the United States renounced the territorial acquisition of Cuba [[Platt Amendment](#)]. With an eye on Germany's ambition in the Pacific, President McKinley decided to retain the Philippines [[William McKinley on the Acquisition of the Philippines](#)]. Americans debated the new realities—should the United States even be an imperial power? [["The Philippine Question,"](#) ["The Paralyzing Influence of Imperialism"](#)]

Secretary of State John Hay brought a bold and creative air to American diplomacy and worked hard to resolve trade issues in China [[First Open Door Note](#)]. But greater Western access to China led to Chinese domestic unrest. In 1899, the Chinese "Boxers" launched a major rebellion to expel foreign influence. [[An Uprising against Foreigners](#)] Missionaries were murdered throughout China, and Western diplomats were besieged in Peking. [[The Boxer Rebellion](#)] The timely arrival of Western military forces, including U.S. Marines, saved the diplomats. The peace that followed was harsh. [[Boxer Protocol](#)]

As the American presence grew in the Pacific, the relationship between the United States and Japan changed, and some leaders, like Theodore Roosevelt, believed that the Japanese-American relationship would be problematic and require delicate diplomacy [[The Threat of Japan](#)]. A 1908 attempt to avoid conflict by recognizing each other's spheres of influence [[Root-Takahira Agreement](#)] brought a respite from conflict—but that would prove to be only a temporary solution.

Even after the end of the Spanish-American war, Latin America absorbed American diplomatic attention. The war underscored the fact that the United States needed the ability to move its navy from the Atlantic to the Pacific quickly in times of conflict, reviving interest in a Central American canal. With the enthusiastic backing of President Theodore Roosevelt, the United States secured access to a site through the Panamanian Isthmus [[Hay/Bunau-Varilla Treaty](#)] and construction began.

Political instability and recurring debt crises in the American republics led to an important change in U.S. diplomatic policy. President Theodore Roosevelt decided that the United States could not

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let European creditors collect their Latin American debts by force. He believed that the United States had a “moral mandate” to intervene first to compel the republics to pay. While this policy of intervention was completely new, it is now called the *Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine*.

The Monroe Doctrine changed again in 1912, when Senator Henry Cabot Lodge argued that the United States would be justified in opposing the transfer of strategic territory in the Americas—even if approved by the state that controlled it—to

prevent its acquisition by a hostile government or corporation. [*Lodge Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine*]

In the early years of the 20th century, the main business of diplomacy was business. Secretary of State Philander Knox was a corporate lawyer whose major concern was U.S. investment abroad. He believed that the dollar could be used both to promote U.S. policy and benefit American investors and the countries in which they invested. [*William Howard Taft on Dollar Diplomacy*] President Taft encouraged investment in sensitive and strategic

areas, such as railroad development in China, and was prepared to commit American force to protect those investments.

One week after President Woodrow Wilson became President in 1913, he denounced the practice of dollar diplomacy in China. [*Woodrow Wilson repudiates Dollar Diplomacy*] Change was in the air, but a conflict greater than anything that had come before was on the horizon. ■